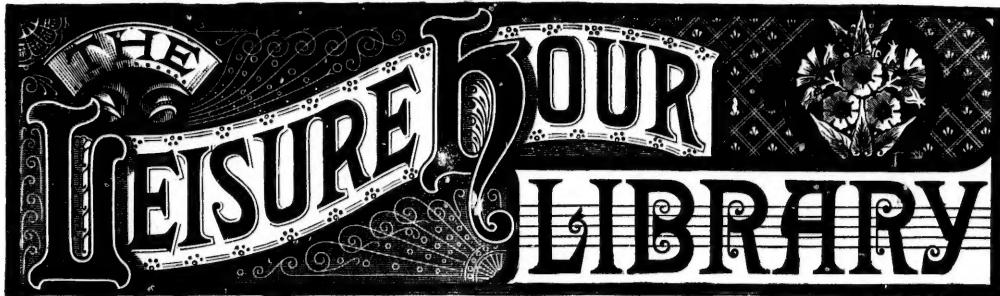


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SIR NOEL'S HEIR.

A Novel.

By Mrs. MAY AGNES FLEMING,

AUTHOR OF "GUY EARLS COURT'S WIFE," "A TERRIBLE SECRET," "A WONDERFUL WOMAN," "A MAD MARRIAGE,"
"ACRINE'S REVENGE," "THE MYSTERY AT BLACKWOOD GRANGE," ETC., ETC.

From *Peterson's Magazine*, by special arrangement with Mr. Charles J. Peterson.

CHAPTER I.

SIR NOEL'S DEATH-BED.

THE December night had closed in wet and wild around Thetford Towers. It stood down in the low ground, smothered in trees, a tall, gaunt, hoary pile of gray stone, all peaks and gables and stacks of chimneys, and roof-infested turrets. A queer, massive, old house, built in the days of James the First, by Sir Hugo Thetford, the first baronet of the name, and as staunch and strong now as then.

The December day had been overcast and gloomy, but the December night was stormy and wild. The wind worried and wailed through the tossing trees with whistling moans and shrieks that were desolately human, and made me think of the sobbing banshee of Irish legends. Far away the mighty voice of the stormy sea mingled its hoarse bass, and the rain lashed the windows in long, slanting lines. A desolate night and a desolate scene without; more desolate still within, for on his bed, this tempestuous winter night, the last of the Thetford baronets lay dying.

Through the driving wind and lashing rain a groom galloped along the high road to the village at break-neck speed. His errand was to Dr. Gale, the village surgeon, which gentleman he found just preparing to go to bed.

"For God's sake, doctor!" cried the man, white as a sheet, "come with me at once! Sir Noel's killed!"

Dr. Gale, albeit phlegmatic, staggered back, and stared at the speaker against.

"What? Sir Noel killed?"

"We're afraid so, doctor; none of us knows for certain sure, but he lies there like a dead man. Come quick, for the love of goodness, if you want to do any service!"

"I'll be with you in five minutes," said the doctor, leaving the room to order his horse and don his hat and great coat.

Dr. Gale was as good as his word. In less than ten minutes he and the groom were dying suddenly along to Thetford Towers.

"How did it happen?" asked the doctor, hardly able to speak for the furious pace at which they were going. "I thought he was at Lady Stokes's ball."

"He did go," replied the groom; "leastways he took my lady there; but he said he had a friend to meet from London at the Royal George to-night, and he rode back. We don't, none of us, know how it happened; for a better or surer rider than Sir Noel there ain't in Devonshire; but Diana must have slipped and threw him. She came galloping in by herself about half an hour ago all blown; and me and three more set off to look for Sir Noel. We found him about twenty yards from the gates, lying on his face in the mud, and as stiff and cold as if he was dead."

"And you brought him home and came for me?"

"Directly, sir. Some wanted to send word to my lady; but Mrs. Hilliard, she thought how you had best see him first, sir, so's we'd know what danger he was really in before alarming her ladyship."

"Quite right, William. Let us trust it may not be serious. Had Sir Noel been—I mean, I suppose he had been dining?"

"Well, doctor," said William, "Arneaud, that's his valet de chambre, you know, said he thought he had taken more wine than was prudent going to Lady Stokes's ball, which her ladyship is very particular about such, you know, sir."

"Ah! that accounts," said the doctor, thoughtfully; "and now, William, my man, don't let's talk any more, for I feel completely blown already."

Ten minutes' sharp riding brought them to the great entrance gates of Thetford Towers. An old woman came out of a little lodge, built in the huge masonry, to admit them, and they dashed up the long winding avenue under the surging oaks and chestnuts. Five minutes more and Dr. Gale was running up a polished staircase of black, slippery oak, down an equally wide and black and slippery passage, and into the chamber where Sir Noel lay.

A grand and stately chamber, lofty, dark and wainscoted, where the wax candles made lumi-

nous clouds in the darkness, and the wood-fire on the marble hearth failed to give heat. The oak floor was overlaid with Persian rugs; the windows were draped in green velvet and the chairs were upholstered in the same. Near the center of the apartment stood the bed, tall, broad, quaintly carved, curtained in green velvet, and on it, cold and lifeless, lay the wounded man. Mrs. Hilliard, the housekeeper, sat beside him, and Arneaud, the Swiss valet, with a frightened face, stood near the fire.

"Very shocking business this, Mrs. Hilliard," said the doctor, removing his hat and gloves—"very shocking. How is he? Any signs of consciousness yet?"

"None whatever, sir," replied the housekeeper, rising. "I am so thankful you have come. We, none of us, knew what to do for him, and it is dreadful to see him lying there like that."

She moved away, leaving the doctor to his examination. Ten minutes, fifteen, twenty passed; then Dr. Gale turned to her with a very pale, grave face.

"It is too late, Mrs. Hilliard. Sir Noel is a dead man!"

"Dead!" repeated Mrs. Hilliard, trembling and holding by a chair. "Oh, my lady! my lady!"

"I am going to bleed him," said the doctor, "to restore consciousness. He may last until morning. Send for Lady Thetford at once."

Arneaud started up. Mrs. Hilliard looked at him, wringing her hands.

"Break it gently, Arneaud. Oh, my lady! my dear lady! So young and so pretty—and only married five months!"

The Swiss valet left the room. Dr. Gale got out his lancet, and desired Mrs. Hilliard to hold the basin. At first the blood refused to flow—but presently it came in a little, feeble stream. The closed eyelids fluttered; there was a restless movement, and Sir Noel Thetford opened his eyes in tale mortal life once more. He looked first at the doctor, grave and pale, then at the housekeeper, sobbing on her knees by the bed. He was a young man of seven-and-twenty, fair and handsome, as it was in the nature of the Thetfords to be.

"What is it?" he faintly asked. "What is the matter?"

"You are hurt, Sir Noel," the doctor answered, sadly; "you have been thrown from your horse. Don't attempt to move—you are not able."

"I remember—I remember," said the young man, a gleam of recollection lighting up his ghastly face. "Diana slipped, and I was thrown. How long ago is that?"

"About an hour."

"And I am hurt? Badly?"

He fixed his eyes with a powerful look on the doctor's face, and that good man shrunk away from the news he must tell.

"Badly?" reiterated the young baronet, in a peremptory tone, that told of his nature. "Ah! you won't speak, I see! I am, and I feel—I feel. Doctor, am I going to die?"

He asked the question with a sudden wildness—a sudden horror of death, half starting up in him. Still the doctor did not speak; still Mrs. Hilliard's suppressed sobs echoed in the stillness of the vast room.

Sir Noel Thetford fell back on his pillow, a shadow as ghastly and awful as death itself lying on his face. But he was a brave man and the descendant of a fearless race; and except for one convulsive throes that shook him from head to foot, nothing told his horror of his sudden fate. There was a weird pause. Sir Noel lay staring straight at the oaken wall, his bloodless face awful in its intensity of hidden feeling. Rain and wind outside rose higher and higher, and beat clamorously at the windows; and still above them, mighty and terrible, rose the far-off voice of the ceaseless sea.

The doctor was the first to speak, in hushed and awe-struck tones.

"My dear Sir Noel, the time is short, and I can do little or nothing. Shall I send for the Rev. Mr. Knight?"

The dying eyes turned upon him with a steady gaze.

"How long have I to live? I want the truth."

"Sir Noel, it is very hard, yet it must be Heaven's will. But a few hours, I fear."

"So soon?" said the dying man. "I did not think—Send for Lady Thetford," he cried, wildly, half raising himself again—"send for Lady Thetford at once!"

"We have sent for her," said the doctor; "she will be here very soon. But the clergyman, Sir Noel—the clergyman. Shall we not send for him?"

"No!" said Sir Noel, sharply. "What do I want of a clergyman? Leave me, both of you. Stay, you can give me something. Gale, to keep up my strength to the last? I shall need it. Now go. I want to see no one but Lady Thetford."

"My lady has come!" cried Mrs. Hilliard, starting to her feet; and at the same moment the door was opened by Arundel, and a lady in a sparkling ball-dress swept in. She stood for a moment on the threshold, looking from face to face with a bewildered air.

She was very young—scarcely twenty, and unmistakably beautiful. Taller than common, willowy and slight, with great, dark eyes, flowing dark curls, and a colorless olive skin. The darkly handsome face, with pride in every feature, was blanched now almost to the hue of the dying man's; but that glittering, bride-like figure, with its misty point-lace and blazing diamonds, seemed in strange contradiction to the idea of death.

"My lady! my lady!" cried Mrs. Hilliard, with a suppressed sob, moving near her.

The deep, dark eyes turned upon her for an instant, then wandered back to the bed; but she never moved.

"Ada," said Sir Noel, faintly, "come here. The rest of you go. I want my wife and my wife." The graceful figure in its shining robes and jewels, flitted over and dropped on its knees by his side. The other three quitted the room and closed the door. Husband and wife were alone with only death to overbear.

"Ada, my poor girl, only five months a wife—it is very hard on you; but it seems I must go. I have a great deal to say to you, Ada—I that I can't die without saying. I have been a villain, Ada—the greatest villain on earth to you."

She had not spoken. She did not speak. She knelt beside him, white and still, looking and listening with strange calm. There was a sort of white horror on her face—but very little of the despairing grief one would naturally look for in the dying man's wife.

"I don't ask you to forgive me, Ada—I have wronged you too deeply for that; but I loved

you so dearly—so dearly! Oh, my God! what a lost and cruel wretch I have been."

He lay panting and gasping for breath. There was a draught which Dr. Gale had left standing near, and he made a motion for it. She held it to his lips, and he drank; her hand was unsteady and spilled it, but still she never spoke.

"I cannot speak loudly, Ada," he said, in a husky whisper. "My strength seems to grow less every moment; but I want you to promise me before I begin my story that you will do what I ask. Promise! promise!"

He grasped her wrist and glared at her almost fiercely.

"Promise!" he reiterated. "Promise! promise!"

"I promise," she said, with white lips.

"May Heaven deal with you, Ada Thetford, as you keep that promise. Listen now."

The wild night wore on. The cries of the wind in the trees grew louder and wilder and more desolate. The rain beat and beat against the curtained glass; the candles guttered and flared; and the old fire died out and died out. And still, long after the midnight hour had tolled, Ada, Lady Thetford, in her lace and silk and jewels, knelt beside her young husband, and listened to the dark and shameful story he had to tell. She never once faltered, she never spoke or stirred; but her face was whiter than her dress, and her great dark eyes dilated with a horror too intense for words.

The voice of the dying man sank lower and lower—it fell to a dull, choking whisper at last.

"You have heard all," he said huskily.

"All?"

The word dropped from her lips like ice—the frozen look of blank horror never left her face.

"And you will keep your promise?"

"Yes."

"God bless you! I can die now! Oh, Ada! I cannot ask you to forgive me; but I love you so much—so much! Kiss me once, Ada, before I go."

His voice failed even with the words. Lady Thetford bent down and kissed him, but her lips were as cold and white as his own.

They were the last words Sir Noel Thetford ever spoke. The restless sea was suddenly ebbing, and the soul of the man was floating away with it. The gray, chill light of a new day was dawning over the Devonshire fields, rainy and raw, and with its first pale ray the soul of Noel Thetford, baronet, left the earth forever.

An hour later, Mrs. Hilliard and Dr. Gale ventured to enter. They had rapped again and again; but there had been no response, and alarmed they had come in. Stark and rigid already lay what was mortal of the Lord of Thetford Towers; and still on her knees, with that frozen look on her face, knelt his living wife.

"My lady! my lady!" cried Mrs. Hilliard, her tears falling like rain. "Oh! my dear lady, come away!"

She looked up, then again at the marble form on the bed, and without a word or cry, slipped back in the old housekeeper's arms in a dead faint.

CHAPTER II.

CAPT. EVERARD.

It was a very grand and stately ceremonial, that funeral procession from Thetford Towers. A week after that stormy December night they laid Sir Noel Thetford in the family vault, where generation after generation of his race slept their last long sleep. The gentry for miles and miles around were there, and among them came the heir-at-law, the Rev. Horace Thetford, only an obscure country curate now, but failing male heirs to Sir Noel, successor to the Thetford estate and fifteen thousand a year.

In a bedchamber, luxurious as wealth can make a room, lay Lady Thetford, dangerously ill. It was not a brain fever exactly, but something very like it into which she had fallen, coming out of that death-like swoon. It was all very sad and shocking—the sudden death of that gay and handsome young baronet, and the serious illness of his poor wife. The funeral oration of the Rev. Mr. Knight, rector of St. Gosport, from the text, "In the midst of life we are in death," was most eloquent and impressive, and women with tender hearts shed tears, and men listened with grave, sad faces. It was such a little while—only five short months—since the wedding-bells had rung, and there had been bonfires and feasting throughout the village; and Sir Noel, looking so proud and so happy, had driven up to the illuminated hall

with his handsome bride. Only five months; and now—and now!

The funeral was over and everybody had gone back home—everybody but the Rev. Horace Thetford, who lingered to see the result of his lady's illness, and if she died, to take possession of his estate. It was utterly dismal in the dark, hushed old house, with Sir Noel's ghost seeming to haunt every room—very dismal and ghastly this waiting to step into dead people's shoes; but then there was fifteen thousand a year, and the finest place in Devonshire; and the Rev. Horace would have faced a whole regiment of ghosts and lived in a vault for that.

But Lady Thetford did not die. Slowly but surely, the fever that had worn her to a shadow left her; and by-and-by, when the early primroses peeped through the first blackened earth, she was able to come down-stairs—to come down feeble and frail and weak, colorless as death and as silent and cold.

The Rev. Horace went back to Yorkshire, yet not entirely in despair. Female heirs could not inherit Thetford—as if they had been talking and he widow, not yet twenty, was left alone in the dreary old mansion. People were very sorry for her, and came to see her, and begged her to be resigned to her great loss; and Mr. Knight preached endless homilies on patience, and hope, and submission, and Lady Thetford listened to them just as if they had been talking of Greek. She never spoke of her dead husband—she shivered at the mention of his name; but that night at his dying bed had changed her as never woman changed before. From a bright, ambitious, pleasure-loving girl, she had grown into a silent, haggard, hopeless woman. All the sunny spring days she sat by the window, her bonnet, gazing at the misty, boundless sea, pale and mute—dead in life.

The friends who came to see her, and Mr. Knight, the rector, were a little puzzled by this abnormal case, but very sorry for the pale young widow, and disposed to think better of her than ever before. It must surely have been the vilest slander that she had not cared for her husband, that she had married him only for his wealth and title; and that young soldier—that captain of dragons—must have been a myth. She might have been engaged to him, of course, before Sir Noel came, that seemed to be an undisputed fact; and she might have jilted him for a wealthier lover, that was all a common case. But she must have loved her husband very dearly, or she never would have been broken-hearted like this at his loss.

Spring deepened into summer. The June roses in the flower-garden of Thetford were in rosy bloom, and my lady was ill again—very, very ill. There was an eminent physician down from London, and there was a frail little mite of babyhood lying among lace and flannel; and the eminent physician shook his head, and looked portentously grave, as he gazed down the crib to the bed. Whiter than the pillows, paler than snow, Ada, Lady Thetford, lay, hovering in the Valley of the Shadow of Death; that other feeble little life seemed flickering, too—it was so even a toss up between the great rival powers, Life and Death, that a straw might have turned the scale either way. So slight being that baby-hold of gasping breath, that Mr. Knight, in the absence of any higher authority, and in the unconsciousness of the mother, took it upon himself to baptize it. So a china bowl was brought, and Mrs. Hilliard held the bundle of flannel and long white robes, and the child was named—the name which the mother had said weeks ago it was to be called, if a boy—Rupert Noel Vandeleur Thetford; for it was a male heir, and the Rev. Horace's cake was dough.

Days went by, weeks, months, and to the surprise of the eminent physician, neither mother nor child, in summer, winter, turned; and the anniversary of Sir Noel's death came round, and my lady was able to walk down-stairs, shivering in the warm air under all her wraps. She had expressed no pleasure or thankfulness in her own safety, or that of her child. She looked so dangerously ill if it were a boy or girl; and hearing its sex, had turned her face to the wall, and lay for hours and hours speechless and motionless. Yet it was very dear to her, too, by fits and starts, as it were. She would hold it in her arms half a day, sometimes covering it with kisses, with jealous, passionate tears, crying out it, and then, in a fit of sullen apathy, would resign it to its nurse, and not ask to see it for hours. It was very strange and inexplicable, her conduct, altogether; more es-

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peculiarly, as with her return to health came too many of cheerfulness or hope. The dark gloom that overshadowed her life seemed to settle into a chronic disease, rooted and incurable. She never went out; she returned no visits; she gave no invitations to those who came to repeat theirs. Gradually people fell off; they grew tired of that sullen coldness in which Lady Thetford wrapped herself as in a mantle, until Mr. Knight and Dr. Gale grew to be almost her only visitors. "Mariana, in the Moated Grange," never led a more solitary and dreary existence than the handsome young widow, who dwelt a recluse at Thetford Towers; for she was very handsome still, of a pale moonlight sort of beauty, the great, dark eyes, and abundant dark hair, making her fixed and changeless pallor all the more remarkable.

Months and seasons went by. Summers followed winters, and Lady Thetford still buried herself alive in the gray old manor—and the little heir was six years old. A delicate child still, puny and sickly, and petted and spoiled, and indulged in every childish whim and caprice. His mother's image and idol—no look of the fair-haired, sanguine, blue-eyed Thetford sturdiness in his little, pinched, pale face, large, dark eyes, and crisp, black ringlets. The years had gone by like a slow dream; life was stagnant enough in St. Gosport, doubly stagnant at Thetford Towers, whose mistress rarely went abroad beyond her own gates, save when she took her little son out for an airing in the pony phaeton.

She had taken him out for one of those airings on a July afternoon, when he had nearly accomplished his seventh year. They had driven seaward some miles from the manor-house, and Lady Thetford and her little boy had got out, and were strolling leisurely up and down the hot, white sands, while the groom waited with the pony-phaeton just within sight.

The long July afternoon wore on. The sun that had blazed all day like a wheel of fire, dropped lower and lower into the crimson west. The wide sea shone red with the reflections of the lurid glory in the heavens, and the numberless waves glittered and dashed as if sown with stars. A faint, far-off breeze swept over the sea, salt and cold; and the fishermen's boats danced along with the red sunset glinting on their sails.

Up and down, slowly and thoughtfully, the lady walked, her eyes fixed on the wide sea. As the rising breeze met her, she drew the scarlet shawl she wore over her black silk dress closer around her, and glanced at her boy. The little fellow was running over the sands, tossing pebbles into the surf, and hunting for shells; and her eyes left him wandered once more to the lurid splendor of that sunset on the sea. It was very quiet here, with no living thing in sight but themselves; so the lady's start of astonishment was natural when, turning an abrupt angle in the path leading to the shore, she saw a man coming toward her over the sands. A tall, powerful-looking man of thirty, bronzed and handsome, and with an unmistakably military air, although in plain black clothes. The lady took a second look, then stood stock still, and gazed like one in a dream. The man approached, lifted his hat, and stood silent and grave before her.

"Captain Everard!"

"Yes, Lady Thetford—after eight years—Captain Everard again."

The deep, strong voice suited the bronzed, grave face, and both had a peculiar power of their own. Lady Thetford, very, very pale, held out one of her jeweled hands.

"Captain Everard, I am very glad to see you again."

He bent over the little hand a moment, then dropped it, and stood looking at her silent.

"I thought you were in India," she said, trying to be at ease. "When did you return?"

"A month ago. My wife is dead. I too, am widowed, Lady Thetford."

"I am very sorry to hear it," she said, gravely. "Did she die in India?"

"Yes; and I have come home with my little daughter."

"Your daughter! Then she left a child?"

"One. It is her son who I have brought home. The climate killed her mother. I had mercy on her daughter, and have brought her home."

"I am sorry for your wife. Why did she remain in India?"

"Because she preferred death to leaving me. She loved me, Lady Thetford."

His powerful eyes were on her face—that pale, beautiful face, into which the blood came for an

instant at his words. She looked at him, then away over the darkening sea.

"And you, my lady—you gained the desire of your heart, wealth, and a title? Let me hope they have made you a happy woman."

"I am not happy!"

"No? But you have been—you were while Sir Noel lived?"

"My husband [was very good to me, Captain Everard. His death was the greatest misfortune that could have befallen me."

"But you are young, you are free, you are rich, you are beautiful. You may wear a coronet next time."

His face and glance were so darkly grave, that the covert sneer was almost hidden. But she felt it.

"I shall never marry again, Captain Everard."

"Never? You surprise me! Six years—many, seven, a widow, and with innumerable attractions. Oh, you cannot mean it!"

She made a sudden, passionate gesture—looked at him, then away.

"It is useless—worse than useless, folly, madness, to lift the veil from the irrevocable past. But don't you think, don't you, Lady Thetford, that you might have been equally happy if you had married me?"

She made no reply. She stood gazing seaward, cold and still.

"I was madly, insanely, absurdly in love with pretty Ada Vandeleur in those days, and I think I would have made her a good husband; better, however—forgive me—than I ever made my poor dead wife. But you were wise and ambitious, my pretty Ada, and bartered your black eyes and raven ringlets to a higher bidder. You fitted me in cold blood, poor love-sick devil that I was, and reigned resplendent as my Lady Thetford. Ah! you knew how to choose the better part, my pretty Ada!"

"Captain Everard, I am sorry for the past—I have atoned, if suffering can atone. Have a little pity, and let me alone!"

He stood and looked at her silently, gravely. Then said, in a voice deep and calm:

"We are both free! Will you marry me now, Ada?"

"I cannot!"

"But I love you—I have always loved you. And you—I used to think you loved me!"

He was strangely calm and passionate, voice and glance, and face. But Lady Thetford had covered her face, and was sobbing.

"I did—I do—I always have! But I cannot marry you. I will love you all my life; but don't, don't ask me to give you my wife!"

"As you please!" he said, in the same passionate voice. "I think it is best myself; for the George Everard of to-day is not the George Everard who loved you eight years ago. We would not be happy—I know that. Ada, is that your son?"

"Yes."

"I should like to look at him. Here, my little baronet! I want to see you."

The boy, who had been looking curiously at the stranger, ran up at a sign from his mother. The tall captain lifted him in his arms and gazed in his small, thin face, with which his bright tartan plaid contrasted harshly.

"He hasn't a look of the Thetfords. He is your own son, Ada. My little baronet, what is your name?"

"Sir Rupert Thetford," answered the child, struggling to get free. "Let me go—I don't know you!"

The captain set him down with a grim smile, and the boy clung to his mother's skirts, and eyed the tall stranger askance.

"I want to go home, mamma! I'm tired and hungry."

"Presently, dearest. Run to William, he has cakes for you. Captain Everard, I shall be happy to have you at dinner."

"Thanks; but I must decline. I go back to London to-night. I sail for India again in a week."

"So soon! I thought you meant to remain."

"Nothing is further from my intentions. I merely brought my little girl over to provide her a home; that is why I have troubled you. Will you do me this kindness, Lady Thetford?"

"Take your little girl? Oh, most gladly—most willingly!"

"Thanks! Her mother's people are French, and I know little about them; and, save yourself, I can claim friendship with few in England. She will be poor; I have settled on her all I am worth—some three hundred a year; and you, Lady Thetford, you can teach her, when she grows up, to catch a rich husband."

She took no notice of the taunt; she looked only too happy to render him this service.

"I am so pleased! She will be such a nice companion for Rupert. How old is she?"

"Nearly four."

"Is she here?"

"No; she is in London. I will fetch her down in a day or two."

"What do you call her?"

"Mabel—after her mother. Then it is settled, Lady Thetford, I am to fetch her?"

"I shall be delighted! But won't you dine with me?"

"No. I must catch the evening train. Farewell, Lady Thetford, and many thanks! In three days I will be here again."

He lifted his hat and walked away. Lady Thetford watched him out of sight, and then turned slowly, as she heard her little boy calling her with shrill impatience. The red sunset had faded out; the sea lay gray and cold under the twilight sky, and the evening breeze was chill. Changes in sky and sea and land told of coming night; and Lady Thetford, shivering slightly in the rising wind, hurried away to be driven home.

CHAPTER III.

"LITTLE MAT."

ON the evening of the third day after this interview, a fly from the railway drove up the long, winding avenue leading to the great front entrance of the Thetford mansion. A bronzed military gentleman, a nurse and a little girl, occupied the fly, and the gentleman's keen, dark eyes wandered searchingly around. Swelling meadows, velvet lawns, sloping terraces, waving trees, bright flower-gardens, quaint old fish-ponds, sparkling fountains, and a wooded park, with sprightly deer—that was what he saw, all bathed in the golden halo of the summer sunset. Massive and grand, the old house reared its gray head, half overgrown with ivy and climbing roses. Gaudy peacocks strutted on the terraces; a graceful gazelle flitted out for an instant amongst the trees to look at them, and then fled in affright; and the barking of half a dozen mastiffs greeted their approach noisily.

"A fine old place," thought Captain Everard. "My pretty Ada might have done worse. A grand old place for that puny child to inherit. The staunch old warrior-blood of the Thetfords is sadly adulterated in his pale veins, I fancy. Well, my little May, and how are you going to like all this?"

The child, a bright-faced little creature, with great sparkling eyes and rose-blossom cheeks, was looking in delight at a distant terrace.

"See, papa! See all the pretty peacocks! Look, Ellen," to the nurse, "three, four, five! Oh, how pretty!"

"Then little May will like to live here, where she can see the pretty peacocks every day?"

"And all the pretty flowers, and the water, and the little boy—where's the little boy, papa?"

"In the house—you'll see him presently; but you must be very good, little May, and not pull his hair, and scratch his face, and poke your fingers in his eyes, like you used to do with Willie Brandon. Little May must learn to be good."

Little May put one rosy finger in her mouth, and set her head on one side like a defiant canary. She was one of the prettiest little fairies imaginable, with her pale, flaxen curls, and sparkling light-gray eyes, and apple-blossom complexion; but she was evidently as much spoiled as little Sir Rupert Thetford himself.

Lady Thetford sat in the long drawing-room, after her solitary dinner, and little Sir Rupert played with his rocking-horse and a pile of picture-books in a remote corner. The young widow lay back in the violet-veined depths of a carved and gilded fauteuil, very simply dressed in black and crimson, but looking very fair and stately within. She was watching her boy with a half smile on her face, when a footman entered with Captain Everard's card. Lady Thetford looked up eagerly.

"Show Captain Everard up at once."

The footman bowed and disappeared. Five minutes later, and the tall captain and his little daughter stood before her.

"At last!" said Lady Thetford, rising and holding out her hand to her old lover, with a smile that reminded him of other days—"at last, when I was growing tired waiting. And this is your little girl—my little girl from henceforth! Come here, my pet, and kiss your new mamma."

stances, who, I think, will suit. She is eminently respectable in appearance, quiet and lady-like in manner, with five years' experience in the nursery-governess line, and the highest recommendation from her late employers. She has lost a child, she tells me, and from her looks and manner altogether, I should judge she was a person conversant with misfortune. She will return with me early next week—her name is Mrs. Weymore."

Lady Thetford read this letter with a little sigh of relief—some one else would have the temper and outbursts of little May to contend with now. She wrote to Captain Everard that same day, to announce his daughter's well-being, and inform him that she had found a suitable governess to take charge of her.

The second day of the ensuing week the rector and the new governess arrived. A fly from the railway brought her and her luggage to Thetford Towers late in the afternoon, and she was taken at once to the room that had been prepared for her, whilst the servant went to inform Lady Thetford of her arrival.

"Fetch her here at once," said her ladyship, who was alone in the long drawing-room with the children. "I wish to see her."

Ten minutes after the drawing-room door was flung open, and "Mrs. Weymore, my lady," announced the footman.

Lady Thetford arose to receive her new dependent, who bowed and stood before her with a somewhat flustered and embarrassed air. She was quite young, not older than my lady herself, and eminently good-looking. The tall, slender figure, clad in widow's weeds, was as symmetrical as Lady Thetford's own, and the full black dress set off the pearly fairness of the blonde skin, and the rich abundance of her hair. Lady Thetford's brows contracted a little; her fair, subdued, gentle-looking, girlish young woman, was hardly the strong-minded, middle-aged matron she had expected to take the nonsense out of obstreperous May Everard.

"Mrs. Weymore, I believe," said Lady Thetford, resuming her seat, "may be seated. I wished to see you at once, because I am going out this evening. You have had five years' experience as a nursery-governess, Mr. Knight tells me."

"Yes, my lady."

There was a little tremor in Mrs. Weymore's low voice, and her blue eyes shifted and fell under Lady Thetford's steady and somewhat taunting gaze.

"Yet you look young—much younger than I imagined, or wished."

"I am twenty-seven years old, my lady."

That was my lady's own age precisely, but she looked half a dozen years the elder of the two.

"Are you a native of London?"

"No, my lady—of Berkshire."

"And you have been a widow, how long?"

"What ailed Mrs. Weymore? She was all white and trembling—even her hands, folded and pressed together in her lap, shook in spite of her."

"Eight years and more."

She said it with a sort of sob, hysterically choked. Lady Thetford looked on surprised, and a trifle displeased. She was a very proud woman, and certainly wished for no scene with her hired dependents.

"Eight years is a tolerable time," she said, coolly. "You have lost children?"

"One, my lady."

Again that choked, hysterical sob. My lady went on pitilessly.

"Is it long ago?"

"When—when I lost it, father?"

"Ah! both together? That was rather hard. Well, I hope you understand the management of children—spoiled ones particularly. Here are the two you are to take charge of. Rupert—May, come here."

The children came over from their corner. Mrs. Weymore drew May toward her, but Sir Rupert held aloof.

"This is my ward—this is my son. I presume Mr. Knight has told you. If you can subdue the temper of that child, you will prove yourself, indeed, a treasure. The east parlor has been fitted up for your use; the children will take their meals there with you; the room adjoining is to be the school-room. I have appointed one of the maids to wait on you. I trust you will find your chamber comfortable."

"Exceedingly so, my lady."

"And the terms proposed by Mr. Knight suit you?"

Mrs. Weymore bowed. Lady Thetford rose to close the interview.

"You must need refreshment and rest after

your journey. I will not detain you longer. To-morrow your duties will commence."

She rang the bell—directed the servant who came to show the governess to the east parlor and see to her wants, and then to send nurse for the children. Fifteen minutes after she drove away in the pony-phæton, whilst the new governess stood by the window of the east parlor and watched her vanish in the amber haze of the August sunset.

Lady Thetford's business in St. Gosport detained her a couple of hours. The big, white, August moon was rising as she drove slowly homeward, and the nightingale sang its vesper lay in the scented hedge-rows. As she passed the rectory she saw Mr. Knight leaning over his own gate enjoying the placid beauty of the summer evening, and Lady Thetford reined in her ponies to speak to him.

"So happy to see your ladyship! Won't you alight and come in? Mrs. Knight will be delighted."

Not this evening, I think. Had you much trouble about my business?"

"Had applicants enough, certainly," laughed the rector. "I had reason to remember Mr. Weller's immortal advice, 'Beware of widowers.' How do you like your governess?"

"I have hardly had time to form an opinion. She is younger than I could desire."

"She looks much younger than the age she gives, I know; but that is a common case. I trust my choice will prove satisfactory—her references are excellent. Your ladyship has had an interview with her?"

"A very brief one. Her manner struck me unpleasantly—so odd, and shy, and nervous. I hardly know how to characterize it; but she may be a paragon of governesses, for all that. Good evening; best regards to Mrs. Knight. Call soon and see how your *protégée* gets on."

Lady Thetford drove away. As she alighted from the pony-carriage and ascended the great front steps of the house, she saw the pale governess still seated at the window of the east parlor, gazing dejectedly out at the silvery moonlight.

"A most woful countenance," thought my lady. "There is some deeper grief than the loss of a husband and child eight years ago, the matter with that woman. I don't like her."

No, Lady Thetford did not like the meek and submissive looking governess, but the children and the rest of the household did. Sir Rupert and little May took to her at once—her gentle voice, her tender smile seemed to win its way to their capricious favor; and before the end of the first week she had more influence over them than mother and nurse together. The subdued and gentle governess soon had the love of all at Thetford Towers, except its mistress, from Mrs. Hilliard, the stately housekeeper, down.

She was courteous and considerate, so anxious to avoid giving trouble. Above all, that fixed expression of hopeless trouble on her sad, pale face, made its way to every heart. She had full charge of the children now; they took their meals with her, and she had them in her keeping the best part of the day—an office that was no sinecure. When they were with their nurse, or my lady, the governess sat alone in the east parlor, looking out dreamily at the summer landscape, with her own brooding thoughts.

One evening when she had been at Thetford Towers over a fortnight, Mrs. Hilliard, coming in, found her sitting dreamily by herself, neither reading nor working. The children were over for the day.

"I am afraid you don't make yourself at home here," said the good-natured housekeeper; "you stay too much alone, and it isn't good for young people like you."

"I am used to solitude," replied the governess with a smile, that ended in a sigh, "and I have grown to like it. Will you take a seat?"

"No," said Mrs. Hilliard. "I heard you say the other day you would like to go over the house; so, as I have a couple of hours' leisure, I will show it to you now."

The governess rang eagerly.

"I should be so grateful for trifles. Let me see," she said, "but I feared to give trouble by asking. It is very good of you to think of me, dear Mrs. Hilliard."

"She isn't much used to people thinking of her," reflected the housekeeper, "or she would be so grateful for trifles. Let me see," she said, "but I feared to give trouble by asking. It is very good of you to think of me, dear Mrs. Hilliard."

"She isn't much used to people thinking of her," reflected the housekeeper, "or she would be so grateful for trifles. Let me see," she said, "but I feared to give trouble by asking. It is very good of you to think of me, dear Mrs. Hilliard."

Through the long corridors, up wide, black, slippery stair-cases, into vast, unused rooms, where ghostly echoes and darkness had it all to themselves, Mrs. Hilliard led the governess.

"These apartments have been unused since before the late Sir Noel's time," said Mrs. Hilliard; "his father kept them full in the hunting season, and at Christmas time. Since Sir Noel's death, my lady has shut herself up and received no company, and gone nowhere. She is beginning to go out more of late than she has done ever since his death."

Mrs. Hilliard was not looking at the governess, or she might have been surprised at the nervous restlessness and agitation of her manner, as she listened to these very commonplace remarks.

"Lady Thetford was very much attached to her husband, then?" Mrs. Weymore said, her voice tremulous.

"Ah! that she was! She must have been, for his death nearly killed her. It was sudden enough, and shocking enough, goodness knows! I shall never forget that dreadful night. This is the old banqueting-hall. Mrs. Weymore, the largest and dearest room in the house."

Mrs. Weymore, trembling very much, either with cold or that unaccountable nervousness of hers, hardly looked round at the vast wilderness of a room.

"You were with the late Sir Noel, then, when he died?"

"Yes, until my lady came. Ah! it was a dreadful thing! He had taken her to a ball, and riding home his horse threw him. We sent for the doctor and my lady at once; and when she came, all white and scared like, he sat us out of the room. He was as calm and sensible as you or me, but he seemed to have something on his mind. My lady was shut up with him for about three hours, and then we went in—Dr. Gale and me. I shall never forget that sad sight. Poor Sir Noel was dead, and she was kneeling beside him in her hall dress, like somebody turned to stone. I spoke to her, and she looked up at me, and then fell back in my arms in a fainting fit. Are you cold, Mrs. Weymore, that you shake so?"

"No—yes—it is this desolate room, I think," the governess answered, hardly able to speak.

"It is desolate. Come, I'll show you the billiard-room, and then we'll go up-stairs to the room Sir Noel died in. Everything remains just as it was—no one has ever slept there since. If you only knew, Mrs. Weymore, what a sad time it was; but you do know, poor dear! you have lost a husband yourself!"

The governess flung up her hands before her face with a suppressed cry so full of anguish that the housekeeper stared at her aghast. Almost as quickly she recovered herself again.

"Don't mind me," she said, in a choking voice, "I can't help it. You don't know what I suffered—what I still suffer. Oh, pray, don't mind me!"

"Certainly not, my dear," said Mrs. Hilliard, thinking inwardly the governess was a very odd person, indeed.

They looked at the billiard-room, where the tables stood, dusty and disused, and the balls lay idly by.

"I don't know when it will be used again," said Mrs. Hilliard; "perhaps not until Sir Rupert grows up. There was a time," lowering her voice, "that I thought he would never live to be as old and strong as he is now. He was the puniest baby, Mrs. Weymore, you ever looked at—nobody thought he would live. And that would have been a pity, you know; for then the Thetford estate would have gone to a distant branch of the family, as it would too, if Sir Rupert had been a little girl."

She went on up-stairs to the inhabited part of the building, followed by Mrs. Weymore, who seemed to grow more and more agitated with every word the housekeeper said.

"This is Sir Noel's room," said Mrs. Hilliard, in an awe-struck whisper, as if the dead man still lay there; "no one ever enters here but me."

She unlocked it as she spoke, and went in. Mrs. Weymore followed, with a face of frightened pallor that struck even the housekeeper.

"Good gracious me! Mrs. Weymore, what is the matter? You are as pale as a ghost. Are you afraid to enter a room where a person has died?"

Mrs. Weymore's reply was almost inaudible; she stood on the threshold, pallid, trembling, unaccountably moved. The housekeeper glanced at her suspiciously.

"Very odd," she thought, "very! The new

governesses is either the most nervous person I ever met, or else—no, she can't have known Sir Noel in his lifetime. Of course not."

They left the chamber after a cursory glance around—Mrs. Weymore never advancing beyond the threshold. She had not spoken, and that white pallor made her face ghastly still. "I'll show you the picture-gallery," said Mrs. Hilliard; "and then, I believe, you will have seen all that is worth seeing at Thetford Towers."

She led the way to a long, half-lighted room, wainscoted and paneled, like all the rest, where long rows of dead and gone Thetfords looked down from the carved walls. There were knights in armor, countesses in ruffles and powder and lace, bishops in mitre and crozier in hand, and judges in gown and wig. There were ladies in pointed stomachers and jeweled fans, with the waists of their dresses under their arms, but all fair and handsome, and unmistakably alike. Last of all the long array, there was Sir Noel, a fair-haired, handsome youth of twenty, with a smile on his face and a happy radiance in his blue eyes. And by his side, dark and laughing and beautiful, was my lady in her bridal robes.

"There is not a handsomer face amongst them all than my lady's," said Mrs. Hilliard, with pride. "You ought to have seen her when Sir Noel first brought her home; she was the most beautiful creature I ever looked at. Ah! it was such a pity he was killed. I suppose they'll be having Sir Rupert's taken next and hung beside her. He don't look much like the Thetfords; he's his mother over again—a Vandeleur, dark and still."

If Mrs. Weymore made any reply the housekeeper did not catch it; she was standing with her face averted, hardly looking at the portraits, and was the first to leave the picture-gallery.

There were a few more rooms to be seen—a drawing-room suite, now closed and disused; an ancient library, with one fearful stained window, and a vast echoing reception-room. But it was all over at last, and Mrs. Hilliard, with her keys, trotted cheerfully off; and Mrs. Weymore was left to solitude and her own thoughts once more.

A strange person, certainly. She locked the door and fell down on her knees by the bed-side, sobbing until her whole form was convulsed.

"Oh! why did I come here? Why did I come here?" came passionately with the wild storm of sobs. "I might have known how it would be! Nearly nine years—nine long, long years, and not to have forgotten yet!"

CHAPTER V.

A JOURNEY TO LONDON.

Very slowly, very monotonously went life at Thetford Towers. The only noticeable change was that my lady went rather more into society, and a greater number of visitors came to the manor. There had been a children's party on the occasion of Sir Rupert's eight birthday, and Mrs. Weymore had played for the little people to dance; and my lady had cast off her chronic gloom, and been handsome and happy as of old. There had been a dinner-party later—an unprecedented event now at Thetford Towers; and the weeds, worn so long, had been discarded, and in diamonds and black velvet Lady Ada Thetford had been beautiful, and stately, and gracious as a young queen. No one knew the reason of the sudden change, but they accepted the fact just as they had found it, and set it down, perhaps, to woman's caprice.

So slowly the summer passed: autumn came and went, and it was December, and the ninth anniversary of Sir Noel's death.

A gloomy day—wet, and wild, and windy. The wind, sweeping over the angry sea, surged and roared through the skeleton trees; the rain lashed the windows in rattling gusts; and the leaden sky hung low and frowning over the drenched and dreary earth. A dismal day—very like that other, nine years ago, that had been Sir Noel's last.

In Lady Thetford's boudoir a bright-red coal fire blazed. Pale-blue curtains of satin damask shut out the wintry prospect, and the softest and richest of foreign carpets brushed every foot-fall. Before the fire, on a little table, my lady's breakfast temptingly stood; the silver, old and quaint; the rare antique porcelain sparkling in the ruddy firelight. An easy chair, carved and gilded, and cushioned in azure velvet, stood by the table; and near my lady's plate lay the letters and papers the morning mail had brought.

A toy of a clock on the low marble mantle

chimed musically ten as my lady entered. In her dainty morning negligee, with her dark hair rippling and falling low on her neck, she looked very young, and fair, and graceful. Behind her came her maid, a blooming English girl, who took off the cover and poured out my lady's chocolate.

Lady Thetford sank languidly into the azure velvet depths of her fauteuil, and took up her letters. There were three—one a note from her man of business; one an invitation to a dinner-party; and the third, a big official-looking document with a huge seal and no end of stamps.

The languid eyes suddenly lighted; the pale cheeks flushed as she took it eagerly up. It was a letter from India from Capt. Everard.

Lady Thetford slipped her chocolate, and read her letter leisurely, with her slipped feet on the shining fender. It was a long letter, and she read it over slowly twice, three times, before she laid it down. She finished her breakfast, motioned her maid to remove the service, and lying back in her chair, with her deep, dark eyes fixed dreamily on the fire, she fell into a reverie of other days far gone. The lover of her girlhood came back to her from over the sea. He was lying at her feet once more in the long summer days, under the waving trees of her girlhood's home. Ah, how happy! how happy she had been in those by-gone days, before Sir Noel Thetford had come, with his wealth and his title, to tempt her from her love and truth.

Eleven struck, twelve from the musical clock on the mantle, and still my lady sat living in the past. Outside the wintry storm raged on; the rain clattered against the curtained glass, and the wind worried the trees. With a long sigh my lady awoke from her dream, and mechanically took up the *Times* newspaper—the first of the little heap.

"Vain! vain!" she thought, dreamily; "worse than vain those dreams now. With my own hand I threw back the heart that loved me: of my own free will I resigned the man I loved. And now the old love, that I thought would die in the splendor of my new life, is stronger than ever—and it is nine years too late."

She tried to wrench her thoughts away and fix them on her newspaper. In vain! her eyes wandered aimlessly over the closely-printed columns—her mind was in India with Capt. Everard. All at once she started, uttered a sudden, sharp cry, and grasped the paper with dilated eyes and whitening cheeks. At the top of a column of "personal" advertisements was one which her strained eyes literally devoured.

"Mr. Vyking, who ten years ago left a male infant in charge of Mrs. Martha Brand, wishes to keep that child out of the work-house, he will call, within the next five days, at No. 17 Waddington Street, Lambeth."

Again and again, and again Lady Thetford read this apparently unimportant advertisement. Slowly the paper dropped into her lap, and she sat staring blankly into the fire.

"At last!" she thought, "at last it has come. I fancied all danger was over—that death, perhaps, had forestalled me; and now, after all these years, I am summoned to keep my broken promise!"

The hue of death had settled on her face; she sat cold and rigid, staring with that blank, fixed gaze into the fire. Ceaselessly beat the rain; wilder grew the December day; steadily the moments wore on, and still she sat in that fixed trance. The ornate clock struck two—the sound aroused her at last.

"I must!" she said, setting her teeth. "I will! My boy shall not lose his birthright, come what may!"

She rose and rang the bell—very pale, but icily calm. Her maid answered the summons.

"Eliza," my lady asked, "at what hour does the afternoon train leave St. Gosport for London?"

Eliza stared—did not know, but would ascertain. In five minutes she was back.

"Half-past three, my lady; and another at seven."

Lady Thetford glanced at the clock—it was a quarter past two.

"Tell William to have the carriage at the door at a quarter past three; and do you pack my dressing-case, and the few things I shall need for two or three days' absence. I am going to London."

Eliza stood for a moment quite petrified. In all the nine years of her service under my lady, no such order as this had ever been received. To go to London at a moment's notice—my lady, who rarely went beyond her own park gates! Turning away, not quite certain that her ears

had not deceived her, my lady's voice arrested her.

"Send Mrs. Weymore to me; and do you lose no time in packing up."

Eliza departed. Mrs. Weymore appeared. My lady had some instructions to give concerning the children during her absence. Then the governess was dismissed, and she was again alone.

Through the wind and rain of the wintry storm, Lady Thetford was driven to the station, in time to catch the three-fifty train to the metropolis. She went thinking, with no message to any one, only saying she would be back in three days at the furthest.

In that dull household, where so few events ever disturbed the stagnant quiet, this sudden journey produced an indescribable sensation. What could have taken my lady to London at a moment's notice? Some urgent reason it must have been to force her out of the gloomy seclusion in which she had buried herself since her husband's death. But, discuss it as they might, they could come no nearer the heart of the mystery.

CHAPTER VI.

GUY.

THE rainy December day closed in a rainier night. Another day dawned on the world, sunless, and chilly, and overcast still.

It dawned on London in murky, yellow fog, on sloppy, muddy streets—in gloom and dreariness, and a raw, easterly wind. In the densely populated streets of the district of Lambeth, where poverty huddled in tall, gaunt buildings, the dismal light stole murky and slowly over the crowded, filthy streets and swarming parlours.

In a small upper room of a large dilapidated house, this bad December morning, a painter stood at his easel. The room was bare and cold, and comfortless in the extreme; the painter was middle-aged, small, brown and shriveled, and very much out at elbows. The dull, gray light fell full on his work—no inspiration of genius by any means—only the portrait, coarsely colored, of a fat, well-to-do butcher's daughter round the corner. The man was Joseph Legard, scene-painter to some of the minor city theatres, who eked out his slender income by painting portraits when he could get them to paint. He was as fond of his art as any of the great, old masters; but he had only one attribute in common with those immortals—extreme poverty; for his salary was not large, and Mr. Legard found it a tight fit, indeed, to "make both ends meet."

So he stood over his work this dull morning, however, in his fireless room, with a cheerful, brown face, whistling a tune. In the adjoining room he could hear his wife's voice, raised shrilly, and the cries of half a dozen Legards. He was used to it, and it did not disturb him; and he painted and whistled cheerily, touching up the butcher's daughter's snub nose and fat cheeks and double chin, until light footsteps came running up-stairs, and the door was flung wide by an impetuous hand. A boy of ten, or thereabouts, came in—a bright-eyed, fair-haired lad, with a handsome, resolute face, and eyes of cloudless, Saxon blue.

"Ah, Guy!" said the scene-painter, turning round and nodding good-humoredly. "I've been expecting you! What do you think of Miss Jenkins?"

The boy looked at the picture with the glance of an embryo connoisseur.

"It's as like her as two peas, Joe; or would be, if her hair was a little redder, and her nose a little thicker, and the freckles were plainer. But it looks like her as it is."

"Well, you see, Guy," said the painter, going on with Miss Jenkins's left eyebrow, "it don't do to make 'em too true—people don't like it; they pay their money, and they expect to take it out in good looks. And now, any news this morning, Guy?"

The boy leaned against the window and looked out into the dingy street, his bright, young face growing gloomy and overcast.

"No," he said, moodily; "there is no news, except that Phil Darking was drunk last night, and savage as a mad dog this morning—and that's no news, I'm sure!"

"And nobody's come about the advertisement in the *Times*?"

"No, and never will. It's all humbug what granny says about my belonging to anybody right if I did, they'd have seen after me long ago. Phil says my mother was a housemaid,

and my father a valet—and they were only too glad to get me off their hands. Vyking was a valet, granny says she knows; and it's not likely he'll turn up after all these years. I don't care, I'd rather go to the work-house; I'd rather starve in the streets, than live another week with Phil Darking."

The blue eyes filled with tears, and he dashed them passionately away. The painter looked up with a distressed face.

"Has he been beating you again, Guy?"

"It's no matter—he's a brute! Granny and Ellen are sorry, and do what they can; but it's nothing. I wish I had never been born!"

"It is hard," said the painter, compassionately, "but keep up heart, Guy; if the worst comes, why you can stop here and take pot-luck with the rest—not that that's much better than starvation."

You can take to my business shortly, now, and you'll make a better scene-painter than ever I could. You've got it in you."

"Do you really think so, Joe?" cried the boy, with sparkling eye. "Do you?" I'd rather be an artist than a king—Hullo!"

He stopped short in surprise, staring out of the window. Legard looked up the dirty street came a handsome cab, and stopped at their own door.

The driver alighted, made some inquiry, then opened the cab-door, and a lady stepped lightly out on the curb-stone—a lady, tall and stately, dressed in black and closely veiled.

"Now, who is this visitor he for?" said Legard. "People in this neighborhood ain't in the habit of having morning calls made on them in cabs. She's coming up-stairs!"

He held the door open, listening. The lady ascended the first flight of stairs, stopped on the landing, and inquired of some one for "Mrs. Martha Brand."

"For granny!" exclaimed the boy. "Joe, I shouldn't wonder if it was some one about that advertisement, after all!"

"Neither should I," said Legard. "There! she's gone in. You'll be sent for directly, Guy!"

Yes, the lady had gone in. She had encountered on the landing a sickly young woman with a baby in her arms, who had stared at the name she inquired for.

"Mrs. Martha Brand? Why, that's mother! Walk in this way, if you please, ma'am."

She opened the door, and ushered the veiled lady into a small, close room, poorly furnished. Over a smouldering fire, mending stockings, sat an old woman, who, notwithstanding the extreme shabbiness and poverty of her dress, lifted a pleasant, intelligent face.

"A lady to see you, mother," said the young woman, hushing her fretful baby and looking curiously at the veiled face.

But the lady made no attempt to raise the envious screen, not even when Mrs. Martha Brand got up, dropping her respectful little salute, and placing a chair. It was a very thick veil—an impenetrable shield—and nothing could be discovered of the face behind it but that it was fixedly pale. She sank into the seat, her face turned to the old woman behind that satle screen.

"You are Mrs. Brand?"

The voice was refined and patrician. It would have told she was a lady, even if the rich garments she wore did not.

"Yes, ma'am—your ladyship; Martha Brand."

"And you inserted that advertisement in the Times regarding a child left in your care ten years ago?"

Mother and daughter started, and stared at the speaker.

"It was addressed to Mr. Vyking, who left the child in your charge, by which I infer you are not aware that he has left England."

"Left England, has he?" said Mrs. Brand. "More shame for him, then, never to let me know or leave a farthing to support the boy!"

"I am inclined to believe it was not his fault," said the clear, patrician voice. "He left England suddenly and against his will, and I have reason to think, will never return. But there are others interested—more interested than he could possibly be—in the child, who remain, and who are willing to take him off your hands."

But first, why is it you are so anxious, after keeping him all these years, to get rid of him?"

"Well, you see, your ladyship," replied Martha Brand, "it is not me, nor likewise Ellen there, who is my daughter. We'd keep the lad and welcome, and share the last crust we had with him, as we often have—for we're very poor people; but, you see, Ellen, she's married now, and her husband never could hear Guy—that's what we call him, your ladyship—Guy, which it was

Mr. Vyking's own orders. Phil Darking, her husband, never did like him somehow; and when he gets drunk, saving your ladyship's presence, he beats him most unmerciful. And now we're going to America—to New York, where Phil's got a brother and work is better, and he won't fetch Guy. So, your ladyship, I thought I'd try once more before we deserted him, and put that advertisement in the Times, which I'm very glad I did, if it will fetch the poor lad any friends."

There was a moment's pause; then the lady asked, thoughtfully: "And when do you leave for New York?"

"The day after to-morrow, ma'am—and a long journey it is for a poor old body like me."

"Did you live here when Mr. Vyking left the child with you—in this neighborhood?"

"Not in this neighborhood, nor in London at all, your ladyship. I was Lowden, in Berkshire, and my husband was alive at the time. I had just lost my baby, and the landlady of the hotel recommended me. So he brought it, and paid me thirty sovereigns, and promised me thirty more every twelvemonth, and told me to call on Guy Vyking—and that was the last I ever saw of him."

"And the infant's mother?" said the lady, her voice changing perceptibly—"do you know anything of her?"

But very little," said Martha Brand, shaking her head. "I never set eyes on her, although she was sick at the inn for upward of three weeks. But Mrs. Vine, the landlady, she saw her twice; and she told me what a pretty young creature she was—and a lady, if there ever was a lady yet."

When the child was born in Berkshire—how was it?"

"Well, your ladyship, it was an accident, seeing as how the carriage broke down with Mr. Vyking and the lady, a driving furious to catch the last London train. The lady was so hurt that she had to be carried to the inn, and went quite out of her head, raving and dangerous like. Mr. Vyking had the landlady to wait upon her until he could telegraph to London for a nurse, which one came down next day and took charge of her. The baby wasn't two days old when he brought it to me, and the poor young mother was dreadful low and out of her head all the time. Mr. Vyking and the nurse were all that saw her, and the doctor, of course; but she didn't die, as the doctor thought she would, but got well, and before she came right to her senses Mr. Vyking paid the doctor and told him he needn't come back. And then a little more than a fortnight after, they took her away, all shy and secret-like, and what they told her about her poor baby I don't know. I always thought there was something dreadful wrong about the whole thing."

"And this Mr. Vyking—was he the child's father, the woman's husband?"

Martha Brand looked sharply at the speaker, as if she suspected she could answer that question best herself.

"Nobody knew, but everybody thought who, I've always been of opinion myself that Guy's father and mother were gentlefolks, and I always shall be."

"Does the boy know his own story?"

"Yes, your ladyship—all I've told you."

"Where is he? I should like to see him."

Mrs. Brand's daughter, all this time hushing her baby, started up.

"I'll fetch him. He's up-stairs in Legard's, I know."

She left the room and ran up-stairs. The painter, Legard, still was touching up Miss Jenkins, and the bright-haired boy stood watching the progress of that work of art.

"Guy! Guy!" she cried, breathlessly, "come down-stairs at once. You're wanted."

"Who wants me, Ellen?"

"A lady, dressed in the most elegant and expensive mourning—a real lady, Guy; and she has come about that advertisement, and she wants to see you."

"What is she like, Mrs. Darking?" inquired the painter—"young or old?"

"Young, I should think; but she hides her face behind a thick veil, as if she didn't want to be known. Come, Guy."

She hurried the lad down-stairs and into their little room. The veiled lady still sat talking to the old woman, her back to the dim daylight, and that disguising veil still down. She turned slightly at their entrance, and looked at the boy through it. Guy stood in the middle of the floor, his fearless blue eyes fixed on the hidden face. Could he have seen it he might have started at

the grayish pallor which overspread it at sight of him.

"So like! So like!" the lady was murmuring between her set teeth. "It is terrible—it is marvelous!"

"This is Guy, your ladyship," said Martha Brand. "I've done what I could for him for the last ten years, and I'm almost as sorry to part with him as if he were my own. Is your ladyship going to take him away with you now?"

"No," said her ladyship, sharply; "I have no such intention. Have you no neighbor or friend who would be willing to take and bring him up, if well paid for the trouble? This time the money shall be paid without fail."

"There's Legard's," cried the boy, eagerly. "I'll go to Legard's, granny. I'd rather be with Joe than anywhere else."

"It's a neighbor that lives up-stairs," murmured Martha, in explanation. "He always took to Guy and Guy to him in a way that's quite wonderful. He's a very decent man, your ladyship—a painter for a theatre; and Guy takes kindly to the business, and would like to be of himself. If you don't want to take away the boy, you couldn't leave him in better hands."

"I am glad to hear it. Can I see the man?"

"I'll fetch him!" cried Guy, and ran out of the room. Two minutes later came Mr. Legard, paper cap and shirt-sleeves, bowing very low to the grand, black-robed lady, and only too delighted to strike a bargain. The lady offered liberally; Mr. Legard closed with the offer at once.

"You will clothe him better, and you will educate him and give him your name. I wish him to drop that of Vyking. The salary that I give you now will be sent you this time every year. If you change your residence in the meantime, or wish to communicate with me on any occurrence of consequence, you can address Madam Ada, post office, Plymouth."

She rose as she spoke, stately and tall, and motioned Mr. Legard to withdraw. The painter gathered up the money she laid on the table, and bowed himself, with a radiant face, out of the room.

"As for you," turning to old Martha, and taking out of her purse a roll of crisp, Bank of England notes, "I think this will pay you for the trouble you have had with the boy during the last ten years. No thanks—you have earned the money."

She moved to the door, made a slight, proud gesture with her gloved hand in farewell, took a last look at the golden haired, blue eyed, handsome boy, and was gone. A moment later and her cab rattled out of the murky street, and the trio were alone staring at one another, and at the bulky roll of notes.

"I should think it was a dream only for this," murmured old Martha, looking at the roll with glistening eyes. "A great lady—a great lady, surely! Guy, I shouldn't wonder if that was your mother."

CHAPTER VII.

COLONEL JOCYLN.

FIVE miles away from Theford Towers, where the multitudinous waves leaped and glistened all day in the sunlight, as if a glitter with diamonds, stood Jocyln Hall. An imposing structure of red brick, not yet one hundred years old, with sloping meadows spreading away into the blue horizon, and densely wooded plantations gliding down to the wide sea.

Colonel Jocyln, the lord of these boundless meadows and miles of woodland, where the red deer sported in the green arcades, was born in India, and had been for the past nine years. They were an old family, the Jocylns, as old as any in Devon, and with a pride that bore no proportion to their purse, until the present Jocyln had, all at once, become a millionaire. A penniless young lieutenant in a cavalry regiment, quartered somewhere in Ireland, with a handsome face and dashing manners, he had captivated, at first sight, a wild, young Irish heiress of fabulous wealth and beauty. It was a love-match on her side—nobody knew exactly what it was on his; but they made a moonlight flitting of it, for the lady's friends were grievously wroth. Lieutenant Jocyln liked his profession for its own sake, and took his Irish bride to India, and there an heiress and only child was born to him. The climate disagreed with the young wife—she sickened and died; but the young officer and his baby girl remained in India. In the fullness of time he became Colonel

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keeping its steady gravity—none of the rapture of
accepted lover there.

"You are content, my Rupert?"
"More than content, mother. And you?"
He smiled and, stooping, kissed the warm, pallid
face. "I would do a great deal to make you happy,
Mother, but I would not ask a woman I did not
love to be my wife. Be at rest; all is well with me.
And now I must leave you, if you will not go down
to luncheon."

"I think not; I am not strong to-day. Is May
waiting?"
"More than May. A friend of mine has arrived,
and will stay with us for a few weeks."
Lady Thetford's face had been flushed and
eager, but at the last words it suddenly blanched.

"A friend, Rupert? Who?"
"You have heard me speak of him before," he
said, carelessly; "his name is Guy Legard."

CHAPTER XI.
ON THE WEDDING EVE.
THE family at Thetford Towers were a good deal
surprised, a few hours later that day, by the unex-
pected appearance of Lady Thetford at dinner.
Was as some spirit of the moonlight, she came
on in, just as they entered the dining-room,
and her son presented his friend, Mr. Legard, at once.

face. "Sir Rupert showed me a photograph of
yourself as a child, and I have a good memo-ry for faces,
and knew you at once."

Miss Everard and Mr. Legard fell easily into con-
versation at once, as if they had been old friends.
Lady Thetford's ward was one of those people
who form their likes and dislikes at first sight, and
Mr. Legard's face would have been a pretty sure
letter of recommendation to his wide world
over. May liked his looks; and then he was Sir
Rupert's friend, and she was never over particular
about social forms and customs; and so they
dawdled about the grounds and through the leafy
arcades, in the genial morning sunshine, talking
about Sir Rupert and Rome, and art and artists,
and the thousand and one things that turn up in
conversation; and the moments slipped by, half
hour followed half hour, until May jerked out her
watch at last, in a sudden fit of recollection, and
found, to her consternation, it was past two.

"What will mamma say?" cried the young lady,
aghast. "And Rupert? I dare say he's home to
luncheon before this. Let us go back to the house,"
Mr. Legard. I had no idea it was half so late."

Mr. Legard laughed frankly.
"The honesty of that speech is the highest flattery
my conversational powers ever received. Miss
Everard, I am very much obliged to you. Ah! by
Jove! Sir Rupert himself!"

For riding slowly up under the sunlit trees came
the young baronet. As Mr. Legard spoke, his
eyes fell upon the young man, and he saw a young
man advancing so confidentially with half a dozen
curly poodles frisking about them. To say Sir Ru-
pert was not a bad word, but the way of putting it—his
eyes opened in wide wonder.

"Guy Legard!"
"Thetford! My dear Sir Rupert!"
The baronet leaped off his horse, in his eyes light-
ning, and shook hands with the artist, in a burst of
familiarity very rare with him.

"Where in the world did you drop from, and
how under the sun did you come to be like this with
May?"

"I leave the explanation to Mr. Legard," said
May, blushing a little under Sir Rupert's glance.
"But I go and see mamma, only promising that
luncheon hour is past, and you had better not
linger."

May tripped away, and the two young men fol-
lowed more slowly into the house. Sir Rupert led
his friend to his studio, and left him to inspect the
pictures.

"I speak a word to my mother," he said;
"it will detain me hardly an instant."

"All right!" said Mr. Legard, boyishly. "Don't
hurry yourself on my account, you know."
May's face brightened, and he turned back to his
father as if she had hardly stirred since. She looked
up and half rose as he came in, her eyes painfully
intent on his face, and anxious. But his face, grave and quiet,
told nothing.

"Well," she panted, her eyes glittering.
"Is well, mother. Allen Jocelyn has promised
to become my wife."

"Thank God!"
Lady Thetford sunk back, her hands clasped
tightly over her heart, its loud beating plainly
audible. Her son looked down at her, his face
keeping its steady gravity—none of the rapture of
an accepted lover there.

"You are content, my Rupert?"
"More than content, mother. And you?"
He smiled and, stooping, kissed the warm, pallid
face. "I would do a great deal to make you happy,
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and her son presented his friend, Mr. Legard, at once.

"His resemblance to the family will be the surest
passport to your favor, mother mine," Sir Rupert
said, boyishly. "Don't hurry yourself on my account, you know."
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to luncheon."

ly, with no identifying strawberry mark on my
arm. Who my parents were, or what my real name
is, I know no more than I do of the biography of
the man in the moon."

There was a murmur of astonishment—May and
Rupert widely interested, Lady Thetford white as
a dead woman, her eyes averted, her hand trem-
bling as if pained.

"No," said Mr. Legard, gravely, and a little sad-
ly, "I stand as totally alone in this world as a hu-
man being can stand—father, mother, brother, sister,
I never have known; a nameless, penniless
waif, I was cast upon the world four-and-twenty
years ago. Until the age of twelve I was called
Guy Vyking; then the friends with whom I had
lived left England for America, and a man—a
painter, named Legard, took me and gave me my
name. And there the romance comes in: a lady, a
tall, elegant lady, too closely veiled for us to see
her face, came to the poor home that was mine,
paid those who had kept me from my infancy, and
paid Legard for his future care of me. I have
never seen her since; and I sometimes think," his
voice faltering, "that she may have been my
mother."

There was a sudden clash, and a momentary
confusion. My lady, lifting her glass with that
address which I said it fell, and it was shivered
to atoms on the floor.

"And you? never saw the lady after?" May
asked.

"Never. Legard received regular remittances,
mailed, oddly enough, from your town here—Ply-
mouth. The lady told him, if he ever had occasion
to ask about it, she never did have that I know
of—to address Madam Ada, Plymouth! He
brought me up, educated me, taught me his art and
died. I was old enough then to comprehend my
position, and he never said a word of that know-
ledge was to return 'Madam Ada' her remittances,
with a few sharp lines that effectually put an end
to his life."

"But you never tried to ferret out the mystery
of your birth and this Madam Ada?" inquired Sir
Rupert.

"No," Legard shook his head.
"No; why should I? I dare say I should have
no reason to be proud of my parents if I did find
them, and they evidently were not very proud of
me. I am very much obliged to you. Ah! by
Jove! Sir Rupert himself!"

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treason to the living. But I wish Guy Legard had
never come here."

There was one other person at Thetford Towers
strangely and strongly effected by Mr. Guy Legard,
and that person, oddly enough, was Mrs. Weymore,
the governess. Mrs. Weymore had never even seen
the late Sir Noel that anyone knew of, and yet she
had recoiled with a shrill, feminine cry of utter
consternation at sight of the young man.

"I don't see why you should get the shivers about
him, Mrs. Weymore," Miss Everard remarked, with
her great, bright eyes suspiciously keen; "you
never knew Sir Noel."

Mrs. Weymore sunk down on a lounge in a violent
tremor and faintness.

"My dear, I beg your pardon. It seems strange.
Oh, May! with a sudden, sharp cry, losing self-con-
trol, "who is that young man?"

"Why, Mr. Guy Legard, artist," answered May,
composedly, the bright eyes still on the alert;
"formerly—in 'boyhood's sunny hours,' you know
—Master Guy. Let-me—see! Yes, Vyking."

"Vyking! with a spasmodic cry; and then Mrs.
Weymore dropped her white face in her hands,
trembling from head to foot."

"Well, upon my word," Miss Everard said, ad-
dressing empty space, "this does cap the globe
the Mysteries of Uoloph, in plain reading com-
pared to Mr. Guy Vyking and the effect he produces
upon people. He's a very handsome young man,
and a very agreeable young man; but I should
never have suspected the governess of throwing
all the elderly ladies he meets into gasping
fits. There's Lady Thetford; he was too much
for her, and she had to be kept out of the dining-
room; and here's Mrs. Weymore, being into hysterics
because he used to be called Guy Vyking. I thought
my lady might be the veiled lady of his story;
but now I think it is the other way round."

Mrs. Weymore looked up, her very lips white.

"The veiled lady? What lady? May, tell me all
you know of Mr. Vyking."

"Not Vyking now—Legard," answered May; and
thereupon the young lady detailed the scanty re-
sults the artist had given them of his history.

"And I'm very sure it is a chance at all," con-
cluded May, Everard, transcribing the governess with
an unwinning stare; "and Mr. Legard is as much
a Thetford as Sir Rupert himself. I don't pre-
tend to divination, of course, but I can clearly see
how it is; but it, and you know it, Mrs. Weymore;
and you could tell me the young man, and so
could my lady, if either of you chose."

Mrs. Weymore turned suddenly and caught May's
two hands in hers.

"May, if you care for me, if you have any pity,
don't speak of this. I do know—but I must have
time. My head is in a whirl. Wait, wait, and don't
tell Mr. Legard."

"I won't," said May; "but it is all very strange
and very mysterious, and I should like a three-vol-
ume novel or a sensation play. I'm getting
much interested in the hero of the performance,
and I'm afraid I shall be deplorably in love with
him shortly if this sort of thing keeps on."

Mr. Legard himself took the matter much more
coolly than any one else; smoked cigars philoso-
phically, criticised Sir Rupert's pictures, did a little
drawing, and played billiards with his host
and chess with Miss Everard, rode with that young
lady, walked with her, sang duets with her in a
loud, melodious bass, made himself fascinating,
and took the world easy.

"It is no use getting into a gale about these
things," he said to Miss Everard when she won-
dered at his constitutional phlegm; "the
crooked things will straighten themselves if we
give them time. What is written is written. I
know I shall find out all about myself one day—
like little Paul Dombey, 'I feel it in my bones.'"

Mr. Legard was thrown a good deal upon Miss
Everard's resources for amusement; for, of course,
Sir Rupert's time was chiefly spent at Jocelyn Hall,
and Mr. Legard bore this with even greater ser-
enity than the other. Miss Everard was a very
charming little girl, with a laugh that was sweeter
than the music of the spheres and hundreds of be-
witching little ways; and Mr. Legard undertook to
paint her portrait, and found it the most absorb-
ing work of art he had ever undertaken. As for
the young baronet, spending his evenings at
Hall, they never missed him. His wooing sped on
smoothest wings—Col. Jocelyn almost as much
puzzled as by lady herself; and the course of true
love in this case ran as smooth as butter.

Miss Jocelyn, as a matter of course, was a great
deal at Thetford Towers, and saw with evident
satisfaction the growing intimacy of Mr. Legard
and May. It would be an eminently suitable match,
and May, it would be a pity so much
mystery shrouded the gentleman's birth. Still, he
was a good deal too much to her declining health,
would become an eminent artist; and it would be
highly satisfactory to see May fix her erratic affec-
tions on somebody, and thus be doubly out of her
—Miss Jocelyn's way.

The wedding preparations were going briskly
forward. There was no need of delay; all were
anxious for the marriage—Lady Thetford more
than anxious, of course, to see her declining health
the hurry to have the ceremony irrevocably over
had grown to be something very like a monomania
with her.

"I feel that my days are numbered," she said,
with impatience, to her son, "and I cannot rest in
my grave, Rupert, until I see Allen your wife."

To Sir Rupert more than to his mother, the
mother, hastened on the wedding. An embas-

physician, summoned down from London, confirmed my lady's own fears.

"Her life hangs by a thread," this gentleman said, confidentially to Sir Rupert, "the slightest excitement may snap it at any moment. Don't contradict her—let everything be as she wishes. Nothing can save her, but perfect quiet and repose may prolong her existence."

The last week of September the wedding was to take place, and all was bustle and haste at Jocelyn Hall. Mr. Legard was to stay for the wedding, at the express desire of Lady Theford herself. She had seen him but very rarely since that first day, illness had compelled her to keep her room; but her interest in him was unabated, and she had sent for him to her apartment, and invited him to remain. And Mr. Legard, a good deal surprised, and a little flattered, consented at once.

"Very kind of Lady Theford, you know, Miss Everard," Mr. Legard said, sauntering into the room where she sat, with her ex-governess—Mr. Legard and Miss Everard were growing highly confidential of late—"to take such an interest in an utter stranger as she does in me."

May stole a glance from under her eyelashes at Mrs. Weymore; that lady sat nervous and scared-looking, and altogether uncomfortable, as she had a habit of doing in the young artist's presence.

"Very," Miss Everard said, dryly. "You must feel highly complimented, Mr. Legard, for it's a sort of kindness her ladyship is extremely chary of to utter strangers. Rather odd, isn't it, Mrs. Weymore?"

Mrs. Weymore's reply was a distressed, beseeching look. Mr. Legard saw it, and opened very wide his handsome, smiling mouth.

"Eh?" he said, "it doesn't mean anything, does it? Mrs. Weymore looks mysterious, and I'm so stupid about these things. Lady Theford doesn't know anything about me, does she?"

"Not that I know of," May said, with significant emphasis on the personal pronoun.

"Then Mrs. Weymore didn't. By Jove! I always thought Mrs. Weymore had an odd way of looking at me! And now, what is it?"

He turned his fair, resolute face to that lady with a smile hard to resist.

"I don't make much of a howling about my affairs, you know, Mrs. Weymore," he said; "but for all that, I am none the less interested in myself and my history. If you can open the mysterious little you will be conferring a favor on me I can never repay. And I am positive from your look you can."

Mrs. Weymore turned away, and covered her face with a sort of sob. The young lady and gentleman exchanged startled glances.

"You can then," Mr. Legard said, gravely, but growing very pale. "You know who I am?"

To his boundless consternation Mrs. Weymore rose up and laid at his feet, seizing his hands and covering them with kisses.

"I do! I do! I know who you are, and so shall you before this wedding takes place. But before I tell you I must speak to Lady Theford."

Mr. Legard raised her up, his face as colorless as her own.

"To Lady Theford! What has Lady Theford said to do with me?"

"Everything!" She knows who you are as well as I do. I must speak to her first."

"Answer me one thing—is my name Viking?"

"No. Pray, pray don't," said she, with more questions. As soon as her ladyship is a little stronger, I will go to her and obtain her permission to speak. Keep what I have said a secret from Sir Rupert, and wait until then."

She rose up to go, so haggard and deploring-looking, that neither strove to detain her. The young man stared blankly after her as she left the room.

"At last!" he said, drawing a deep breath. "At last I shall know."

There was a pause; then May spoke in a fluttering little voice.

"How very strange that Mrs. Weymore should be so afraid of all persons in the world."

"Who is Mrs. Weymore? How long has she been here? Tell me all you know of her, Miss Everard."

"And that 'all' will be almost nothing. She came down from London as a nursery-governess to Rupert and me, a week or two after my arrival here, selected by the rector of St. Gosport. She was then what you see her, a pale, subdued creature in widow's weeds, with the look of one who had seen trouble. I have known her so long, and always as she is, pale, still shadow, I suppose that is why it seems so odd."

Mrs. Weymore kept altogether out of Mr. Legard's way for the next week or two. She avoided May also, as much as she could, and struck so palpably from any allusion to the past scene, that May could naturally bide her time in silence, though almost as impatient as Mr. Legard himself.

And whilst they waited the bridal eve came round, and Lady Theford was much better, not able to quit her room, but strong enough to lie on a sofa and talk to her son and Col. Jocelyn, with a dash on her cheek and sparkle in her eye—all unusual there.

The marriage was to take place in the village church, and there was to follow a grand and sumptuous wedding-breakfast; and then the happy pair were to start at once on their bridal tour.

"And I hope to see my boy return," Lady Theford said, after him fondly. "I can hardly ask for more than that."

Late in the afternoon of that eventful wedding-eve, the ex-governess sought out Guy Legard, for the first time of her own accord. She found him in the young baronet's studio, with May, putting the finishing touches to that young lady's portrait. He started up at sight of his visitor, vividly interested. Mrs. Weymore was paler even than usual, but with a look of deep, quiet determination on her face no one had ever seen before.

"You have a great deal to say to me," she said, the young man cried—"to tell me who I am?"

"I have come to keep my promise," Mrs. Weymore answered; "but I must speak to my lady first. I want to tell you that, before you sleep to-night, you shall know."

She left the studio, and the two sat there, breathless, expectant. Sir Rupert was dining at Jocelyn Hall, Lady Theford was alone in high spirits, and Mrs. Weymore was admitted at once.

"I wonder how long you must wait?" said May Everard.

"Heaven knows! Not long, I hope, or I shall go mad with impatience."

An hour passed—two—three, and still Mrs. Weymore was closeted with my lady, and still the pair in the studio waited.

CHAPTER XII.

MRS. WEYMORE'S STORY.

LADY THEFORD sat up among her pillows and looked at her maid, who stood by her side, with an air of astonishment. "be j, le, timid face of Mrs. Weymore were a look altogether new."

"Listen to your story! My dear Mrs. Weymore, what possible interest can your story have for me?"

"More than you think, my lady. You are so much stronger to-day than usual, and Sir Rupert's marriage is so very near that I must speak now or never."

"Sir Rupert!" my lady gasped. "What has your story to do with Sir Rupert?"

"You will hear," Mrs. Weymore said, very sadly. "Heaven knows I should have told you long ago; but it is a story few would care to tell. A cruel and shameful tale of wrong and misery, for my lady, I have been cruelly wronged by one who was once very near to you."

Lady Theford turned ashen white.

"My lady, listen, and you shall hear. All those years that I have been with you, I have not been what I seemed. My name is not Weymore. My name is Theford—as yours is."

An awful terror had settled down on my lady's face. Her lips moved, but she set face before her, with a wild, expectant stare.

"I was a widow when I came to you," Mrs. Weymore went on to say, "but long before I had known that word, my husband, the man whom I ran away from my happy home, from the kindest father and mother that ever lived; I ran away and was married and deserted before I was eighteen years old."

"He came to our village, a remote place, my lady, with a local celebrity for its trout streams, and for nothing else. He came, the man whom I married, on a visit to the great house of the place. We had not the remotest connection with the house, or I might have known his real name, but then I never knew him, and he told me himself, and I never thought of doubting it. I was as simple and confiding as it is possible for the simplest village girl to be, and all the handsome stranger told me was gospel truth; and my life only began, I thought, from the hour I saw him first."

"I met him at the trout streams fishing, and alone, and had come to while the long, lazy hours under the trees. He spoke to me—the handsome stranger, whom I had seen riding through the village beside the squire, like a young prince; and I was only too pleased and flattered by his notice. It is many years ago, my lady, and Mr. Noel took a fancy to my pink-and-white face and fair curls, as fine gentlemen will. It was only fancy—never, at its best, love; or he would not have deserted me pitilessly as he did. I know it now; but then I took the tinsel for pure gold, and would as soon have doubted the creature as I doubt you now."

"My lady, it is a very old story, and very often told. We met by stealth and in secret; and weeks passed and I never learned he was other than what he seemed. He was as true as steel, and as good as gold, and he knew that; and my lady, we were married—really and truly and honestly married, in a little church in Berkshire, in Windsor; and the marriage was recorded in the register of the church, and I have the marriage certificate here in my possession."

Mrs. Weymore touched it bosom as she spoke, and looked with earnest, truthful eyes at Lady Theford. But Lady Theford's face was averted and not to be seen.

"His fancy for me was as fleeting as all his fancies; but it was strong enough and reckless enough whilst it lasted to make him forget all consequences. For it was surely a reckless act for a devoted man, to marry the daughter of a village schoolmaster."

"There was but one witness to our marriage—my husband's servant—George Viking. I never liked the man, he was crafty and cunning, and treacherous, and ready for any deed of evil; but

he was in his master's confidence, and took a house for us at Windsor and lived with us, and kept his master's secrets, and well you may say, for three months sufficed to weary my husband of his childish village girl, and make him thoroughly repent his folly. I saw it from the first—he never tried to hide it. To make it all the more cruel and longer, more and more frequent, until at last he ceased coming altogether. Viking, the truth, came and went; and Viking told me the tale—the hard, cold, bitter truth, that I was never to see my husband more."

"It was the maddest act of a mad young man's life," Viking said to me, coolly, 'and he's repented of it, as I knew he would repent. You'll never see him again, mistress, and you needn't search for him, either. When you find last winter's snow, last autumn's partridges, then you may hope to find him."

"But I am his wife," I said; 'nothing can undo that—his lawful wedded wife. I was his wife fast enough; but there's the law of divorce, and there's no witness but me alive, and you can do your best; and that you do, I will see to it. I'll provide for you handsomely; and when he gets the divorce, if you like, I'll marry you myself."

"I had grown to expect some such revelation, I had been neglected so long. My lady, I don't speak of my feelings, my anguish and shame, and remorse and despair; only tell you here simple facts. But in the days and weeks which followed, I suffered as I never can suffer again in this world."

"I was held little better than a prisoner in the house at Windsor, and the young Viking never gave up the hope that I would one day consent to marry him. More than once I tried to run away, to get on the track of my betrayer, but always to be met by him, and I never saw him. My knees to that man Viking, but I might as well have knelt to a statue of stone."

"I'll tell you what we do," he said, 'we'll go to London. People are beginning to look and talk about here; there they know how to mind their own business."

"I consented readily enough. My one hope now was to find the man who had wronged me, and in London I thought I stood a better chance than at Windsor. We started, Viking and I; but driving to the station we met with an accident, our horse ran away and I was thrown out; after that I hardly remember anything for a long time."

"Weeks passed before I recovered. Then as told my baby had been born and died. I lay in a sort of dull apathy; I had suffered so much that the sense of suffering was dulled and blunted. I knew Viking well enough not to trust him; but I love him; but I was powerless to act, and could only turn my face to the wall and pray to die."

"But I grew strong, and Viking took me to London, and left me in respectably-furnished lodgings. I might have escaped easily enough here, but the energy even to wish for freedom was gone; I sat all day long in a state of miserable, listless languor, and heard nothing of the world."

"One day Viking came to my rooms in a furious state of passion. He and his master had quarrelled. I never knew about what; and Viking had been ignominiously dismissed. The valet tore up and down my little parlor in a towering passion."

"I'll make Sir Noel pay for it, or my name's not Viking," he cried. He thinks because he's married, he'll be able to defy me now. But there's a law in this land to punish bigamy, and I'll have him up for bigamy the moment he's back from his wedding tour."

"I turned and looked at him, but very quietly. 'Sir Noel,' I said. 'Do you mean my husband?'"

"I mean Miss Vandeleur's husband now," said Viking. 'You'll never see him again, my girl. Yes, he's Sir Noel Theford, of Theford Towers, Devonshire; and you can go and call on his pretty new wife as soon as the coroner reports her dead."

"I turned away and looked out of the window without a word. Viking looked at me curiously. Oh! we've got over it, have we; and we're going to get a new husband for me? Now that's what I call sensible. And you'll come for what and wear Sir Noel guilty of bigamy?"

"No," I said. "I don't think you would understand if I told you—only I won't."

"You won't—why not?"

"Never mind why. I don't think you would understand if I told you—only I won't."

"You couldn't be so coaxed?"

"No."

"Don't be too sure. Perhaps I could tell you something might move you, quicken you are. What if I told you your baby did not die that time, but was alive and well?"

"I knew a scene was worse than useless with the man, and I don't want to tell me away, but I heard his last words and started to my feet with outstretched hands."

"Viking, for the dear Lord's sake, have pity on a devoted man, and tell me the truth. Your boy is alive and well, and I've christened him Guy—Guy Viking. Don't you be scared—he's all safe; and the day he shall be restored to you. Now don't you go

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"But now—oh, my dear lady! now you will?"

"Yes, now, on the verge of the grave, I may surely speak. I dare not die with my promise unkept. This very night," Lady Thetford cried, sitting up, flushed and excited, "my boy shall know all—he shall not marry in ignorance of whom he really is. Aliene has the fortune of a princess; and Aliene will not love him less for the title he must lose. When he comes home, Mrs. Weymore, send him to me, and send your son with him, and I will tell them all."

"Dead! Oh, papa, papa!"

"It is very sad, my dear, and very shocking, and terribly unfortunate that it should have occurred just at this time. A postponed wedding is ever ominous of evil."

"Oh! pray, papa, don't think of that! Don't think of

ear, and May and Mrs. Weymore sat crying incessantly, couldn't see what occasion there was for the governess and the painter there in that room of death, and I said so to Miss Everard. There's something mysterious in the latter, for her face flushed and she stammered something both startling and family secrets that had come to light, and her over-excitement of which had hastened Lady Thord's end. I don't like the look of things, and I'm alto-

"No, sir, I think nothing of the sort! Mr. Legard has perfect right to be in this room, or any other room at 'betford Towers.' It is by Rupert's particular request he enquire!"

The colonel frowned again, and turned his back upon the speaker.

"Alleen," he said, haughtily, "as Sir Rupert is not visi-

used a moment on the threshold to answer Aileen's sad glance.

"Only for a few moments, Aileen," he said, his eyes steaming with infinite love; "in half an hour my fate will be decided. Let that fate be what it may, I shall be true to you while life lasts."

With these enigmatical words, he followed the colonel to the library, and the polished oaken door closed be-

'I am not mad, and I do mean it. I may be unfortunate; but, I pray God, never a villain! Right is right; my other Guy is the rightful heir—not I!'

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